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ABSTRACT

Currently, many college and university English departments are reviewing the purpose of their departments. Are they still departments of literature? A writing program is best served by staying in an English department, with the caveat that the department move towards a cultural studies curriculum--the writing program within an English cultural studies program can take a central place in the university curriculum. Cultural studies is the glue that can hold the study of literature and the study of writing together. One of the main theoretical underpinnings of cultural studies is the breakdown of the binary between the production and consumption of texts. A writing program fostering political agency through the use of discourse analysis and critique would be right at home in an English department whose mission was to study language's uses in the service of power. Trimbur believes that cultural studies has sought to shift the focus from the history of the text to the history of readers. The writing program should stand in the center of English/cultural studies curriculum because the emphasis upon critique of discourse is foregrounded. It should stand at the center of the university because, notes Edward White, it has a double role as a socializing discipline (enforcing and confirming student membership in an educated community) and as an individualizing discipline (demanding critical thinking and an active relation of the self to material under study)." (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

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LIKE A HURRICANE: THE WRITING PROGRAM AT THE CENTER OF THE STORM - OVER THE UNIVERSITY

Calls for situating cultural studies, a radically different set of research and teaching practices, at the center of English studies have been frequent of late. James Berlin, "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies: Collapsing Boundaries.

What is the purpose of a department of English? This is a question that many college and university departments (mine included) are asking themselves at this moment. What is the place of the writing program in that department? Or does it even have a place? Indeed, are departments of English still departments of literature, or have they become something else? If not, should they? Could they? I think they can. In his new book *Between the Lines*, John Schilb writes that "...English departments should engage in *civic* education, applying both composition theory and literary theory to this end" (5). I couldn't agree more.

As James Berlin notes above, recent calls to have cultural studies inform English studies have been fairly well received. At the same time, calls for the writing program to separate from the English department, to join the department as a co-equal, to form its own discipline, to become part of cultural studies, textual studies, or English studies have also recently been made with varying frequency and varying success. In this essay I would like to address the following issues: 1) that the writing program is best served by its staying in a department of English, with the strong caveat that the English department move towards a cultural studies curriculum (and I will show that many departments are attempting to do just this); and 2) that the writing program, within an English/cultural studies program, can take a central place

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in the university curriculum. 3) I will end with a discussion of how this writing program might function in the university curriculum.

In calling for the writing program and cultural studies to come together in a strong department of English studies, James Berlin points out that the

> common contention, admittedly within a dizzying range of differences, is that texts, both poetic and rhetorical, must be considered within the (variously defined) social context that produced them. Responses to texts, furthermore, must include the means for critiquing both text and context. ("Composition Studies and Cultural Studies" 99)

This emphasis on textual production and critique is the direction that a writing program and English department should go if they desire to go together.

Despite the sentiment of James Berlin as well as Ed White, who feels that "despite turf and status wars, differing methods of research, new approaches to literacy, and all the other reasons for composition to leave its present home, I think ... that marriage counseling, not divorce, is the answer" (*Developing* 37), there has been, in the past fifteen years, an increasing call for writing programs to reevaluate their position within departments of English, and if the situation seems untenable, to leave the department and either join another department (unlikely) or form their own department. The call to leave the English department, which picked up speed with Maxine Hairston's call in "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections," is, at least on the surface, convincing. But, with a little investigation, the idea that a writing program should leave its home in the department of English seems misguided.

Hairston's initial criticism is a valid one--that the reason many composition scholars and teachers are upset with the treatment they receive from their colleagues in departments of English is because "they [the problems] are so immediate and so daily, and because we have complex psychological bonds to the people who so frequently are our adversaries in our efforts to make the writing programs in our departments as good as they should and can be" (27). Charles Schuster agrees, writing that "English department literary faculty often look upon their compositional brothers and sisters as incompetent, idiosyncratic, confused, valueless, untenurable" (86). And these are, and perhaps continue to be, valid complaints--certainly I have spent a great deal of time trying to educate my colleagues. But I think with the advent, exploration, and adoption by many English departments of cultural studies, some of these attitudes could be changing. With definitions of text, subjectivity, reading and writing expanding in both composition studies and English studies, the time to join forces is now.

An early harbinger of what *could be* is seen in Terry Eagleton's remarks about rhetoric at the end of *Introduction to Literary Theory*, where he concludes that "Rhetoric, which was the received form of critical analysis all the way from ancient society to the eighteenth century, examined the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve certain effects" (205). Some in the field of literature have begun to rethink the relationship between literature, rhetoric, text, reader, and culture. Eagleton cites as evidence Rhetoric's unique ability to work in a trans-disciplinary manner:

> Rhetoric ... shares with Formalism, structuralism and semiotics an interest in the formal devices of language, but like reception theory is also concerned with how these devices are actually effective at the point of 'consumption'; its preoccupation with

> discourse as a form of power and desire can learn much from deconstruction and psychoanalytical theory, and its belief that discourse can be a humanly transformative affair shares a good deal with liberal humanism. (206)

The glue that can join these two fields is cultural studies. One of the main theoretical underpinnings of cultural studies is the breakdown of the binary between the production and consumption of texts. Cultural studies, according to Berlin, promulgates "the examination of the ways discursive formations are related to power or, alternately, the study of language's uses in the service of power" (100). A writing program attempting to foster political agency through the use of discourse analysis and critique would be right at home in an English department whose mission was to "study language's uses in the service of power."

Berlin takes up the question of how to break down the binary between the literary critics' desire to consume texts and the writing program's demand for the production of texts in the article "Rhetoric, Poetic and Culture: Contested Boundaries in English Studies." Berlin defends composition's relationship to literature (and by extension the traditional English department), writing that "Despite the frequent protests to the contrary, writing instruction after all is inescapably imbrecated in the teaching of literature" (23). What Berlin and others, myself included, would like to see, is a more harmonious relationship between the two, which he calls, for aesthetic purposes, rhetoric and poetic, writing, of their historical relationship, that

> Where previous generations of U.S. college students were prepared in the production of the political texts that would enable them to take their rightful place as leaders in their

> communities ... their descendants in this century have been rigorously exercised in the apolitical, aesthetic interpretation of literary texts. (24)

The historic split, between the overtly political and aesthetic appreciation (although in the past the two *have* been know to overlap) is responsible for much of the misunderstanding of what composition studies is about, both within the standard English department and in "society" as a whole. Many in composition would like to return to rhetoric as political training, but "society," the vast mélange of concerned parents, teachers, students, legislators and critics, has increasingly informed the university that if it is not going to teach a strictly vocational writing than it should teach the "appreciation" of "great works," and if any more evidence were needed, all one needs to do is look at the swift cultural condemnation of the new NCTE guidelines for teaching of English. Berlin would like to "refigure the binary" that divides the production and consumption of texts in an English department, bringing textual studies (consumption) and composition studies (production) closer together in a cultural studies/critique model, thus enabling the reconfigured English department to intersect with the university at large on a strong, unified, departmental basis.

Writing that social-epistemic rhetoric "most notably insists on examining all discourse within its historical context, examining the ways language serves as a mediator in the negotiation of individuals within their economic, social, political, and cultural moment," (34), Berlin sees composition and a refigured English studies as mutual allies in the study of the relationship between power, culture and language.

The argument that the traditional department of English/writing program model should not be teaching merely or solely

foundationalist/debate/vocational writing is taken up by Sharon Crowley who feels that modernist/current-traditional rhetoric, the kind of rhetoric most often endorsed by "society," (4-5), is not useful in the postmodern age because, "to define rhetoric as an instrument for purveying empirical or introspective truth is to obscure its classical function as the discipline that prepared people to arbitrate ethical, political, aesthetic, and legal questions" (156). Crowley reminds us that attempts to make rhetoric and composition a means to transmit "results" (including the results of the traditional English department's literary analysis) are atavistic especially, as she points out, since foundationalist epistemologies are less and less useful in the postmodern age.

Berlin's argument that the boundaries between English studies and composition studies and the expanding boundaries between all of the disciplines need to be exploited foreshadows cultural studies' idea of *transdisciplinarity*. In their "Introduction" to their book *Cultural Studies*, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg argue that

> within the fragmented institutional configuration of the academic left, cultural studies holds special intellectual promise because it explicitly attempts to cut across diverse social and political interests and address many of the struggles within the current scene. (1)

What I am arguing for is a writing program housed inside an English department which is philosophically similar to the kind of cultural studies program that Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg are advocating. This would be a department wholly aware that the "conception of the constructive capacity of language thus completely negates the distinction between referential and creative discourse and the binary oppositions they have been made to enforce" ("Rhetoric, Poetic, and Culture" 35); in other words, it is a

department that realizes that it has a good thing in a "composition theory [that] resists boundaries and blurs distinctions between disciplines" (Gere 3).

Sherry Little and Shirley Rose, ironically in their essay about a writing program *leaving* the English department, reinforce the idea that a writing program fits nicely with an English/cultural studies department: "In many ways it [composition studies] is a metadiscipline challenging conventional notions about what actually constitutes a 'discipline'"(22). This is *exactly* what I see a cultural studies model for the English department is attempting to do. Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg write that "cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture" (4). It seems that a writing program could, should, and in some senses, *does* lie at the heart of the cultural studies project.

John Trimbur, for one, seems to agree, taking for granted that composition studies and cultural studies are not only natural allies, but are already perfectly positioned for a project such as the one I'm proposing:

> The question cultural studies leads us to ask is not just how writers write but how literacy has been, and can be, produced and used to increase democratic participation in public life, to give voice to the needs and experience of those who have been silenced and marginalized, to articulate political desires. ("Cultural Studies and Teaching Writing" 13)

This idea of an English department looking at both the production and consumption of not only standard written texts, but of cultural artifacts is an exciting one. This is where composition studies has to go if it is to fulfill its mission as a discipline concerned with what Andrea Lunsford calls "a focus

on the constructed or composed quality of all experience, of all texts" (10). The perceived danger by some in composition studies, that composition has become the service branch of a textual studies program (the non-fiction branch of the literature department, or as it was recently called in a department meeting, "English without books") is real, but a writing program that is operating as one of the foundational legs of an English/cultural studies department stands a much better chance for real, active, participation in the department (and consequently, the university) than ever before.

Exploring texts through the lens of cultural studies "revises the severe textualism of Postmodernism" (Trimbur 127). Cultural studies, with its desire to erase the gulf between popular culture and "high" culture (something Postmodernism started towards, with its move towards the erasure of any difference between high and low culture, but ultimately shied away from), bodes well for students who have been brought up in a world that has already moved towards an erasure of these boundaries. Students no longer see a true difference between television, the movies, music, art, and "literature" (witness the success of *The Scarlet Letter*); in fact, I see television, the movies, art, etc. divided by students, generally not into terms of high and low but into "easy" and "hard." While easy and hard are individually constructed in one sense (and perhaps even Romantic in another) they are different than "high" and "low," which are often ideals forced upon students from above (and then disseminated to them in a lecture, reading list, or syllabus). Students are going to be introduced to differences between high and low culture only at the university, where it will seem to them an artificial difference, created in a formalist literature department desperate to hold on to a high cultural canon.

Trimbur writes that "cultural studies has sought to shift the focus from the history of the text (and its interrogation by the expert critic) to the history of readers (and accounts of ordinary experience)" (127). Asking students to write about their experiences constructing the subjectivity of the text, as well as their own student subjectivities as reader-participants, becomes a legitimate and powerful aspect of the writing program.

Students' experiences in constructing different subjectivities while in the writing program can then easily be transferred to other disciplines. The writing program should stand at the center of the English/cultural studies curriculum because the emphasis upon critique of discourse is foregrounded. Later, as students move through other disciplines towards their degrees, this skill will serve them well.

One of Trimbur's better ideas, one that bodes well for compositionists, is that

> For cultural studies, the reception of social texts is not the result of an inexhaustible play of signifiers or an indeterminate plurality of (mis)readings. Reading the world remains bound by the pressures and limits of structured and overdetermined discursive spaces. (128)

The movement away from Postmodernism's most nihilistic aspect (the "inexhaustible play of signifiers") is a good one. Cultural studies has taken from postmodernism the more positive aspects (critique, an emphasis on ideological positioning) and jettisoned the more difficult or destructive tendencies (nihilism, privileging of texts, a subtle elitism). An expanded English department is a cultural studies tradition would help to create students more able to think in terms of critique, and not merely criticism.

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In terms of the university as a whole, a reconfigured English/cultural studies department can easily stand at the center of any progressive curriculum.

We are living in an age where many of my colleagues, both in and out of the English department, are increasingly more likely to admit that their own epistemologies are questionable and who are increasingly more likely to be teaching their students some form of critique/critical thinking skills. It is because of the tendency towards a postmodern critique of discourse and its place in the construction of political agency in composition studies that I argue that an English/cultural studies department, with a strong writing program at its core ought to make some moves towards the center of the university curriculum.

The best argument for the centrality of writing in any configuration of the university comes from Edward White's idea that

> The place of writing at the center of the liberal arts undergraduate curriculum derives from its double role as a socializing discipline (enforcing and confirming student membership in an educated community) and as an individualizing discipline (demanding critical thinking and an active relation of the self to material under study). (*Developing* 62)

And while White doesn't specifically posit a model where a writing *program* is at the center of the university, writing has become more important, more talked about, and more visible in the past ten years than it has arguably ever been before--and as more and more schools move towards some form of WAC, develop writing centers, and hire rhetoric and composition specialists

at a record pace, the writing program, as an intellectual center, a clearinghouse for ideas, a training ground for future teachers, and a site of debate, has to assume more of a central role in the intellectual mission of the university.

I am not however, advocating a blitzkrieg takeover of all university discourse, far from it--but why, the somewhat rhetorical question goes, if science is left to the scientists, and history to the historians, should writing not be left to the writing specialists? And despite the relative naiveté of this statement (there are, after all, disciplinary writing specialists all across campus, and an even larger number of teachers and instructors who are interested in writing and how it can help their pedagogies) the writing program can make itself available to any and all departments that wish to look at the discourse of their discipline in an attempt to recognize the constructedness of their disciplines and/or departments.

One of the ways in which writing has been making inroads into other disciplines is the move at many universities to some form of Writing Across the Curriculum. But the WAC model is not perfect. On many of the campuses that WAC has been introduced, its development and success has been rocky. For a discipline that is seen as so necessary and mandatory, especially in a WAC model, writing specialists are often given little heed when the direction of the university curriculum is being contemplated. Take, for instance, the college where I am currently employed. Two years ago we created a WAC program that once in place had little specific administrative oversight, tenuous power to assess proposed course offerings, and was dependent upon the interest and benevolence of individual teachers for its existence. In other words, when WAC was passed, funded, and required of the students at my school, the majority of faculty were in agreement that

writing was somehow *important*; but no one on campus beyond the junior faculty members nominally in charge of the program has any idea of WHY it is important in a cross-curricular manner, or HOW to communicate that importance to interested faculty and students.[1]

Catherine Blair, in an essay proposing that WAC be taken out of the hands of writing specialists, writes that "Entrusting the writing program to the English department is based on the belief that the English department has a special relationship to language and is, therefor, the department that knows the most about writing--in fact the department that owns writing" (384). Blair's assumption that the English department is still literature oriented aside (and it's a fair assumption), she never mentions any sort of writing *program* in her complaint against the English department, let alone any sort of department or program beyond literature. Her only mention of a writing program is when she relates that the WAC program at her institution (Bucknell) is "overseen by a committee made up of members from the major divisions of the faculty--engineering, the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the library" (387) which she calls the writing committee. In a utopian community a committee like this could function and could even make WAC work. But every dialog needs a start and perhaps a direction. What better place for a writing program than at the center of the dialog? This does not mean at the head of the dialog, and it doesn't even mean set the agenda of the dialog, but a writing program that is open to the university and its influences and voices can be a powerful ally in a campus writing project such as WAC.

1Lest this seem atypical, at another university where I spent two days interviewing, their WAC program was run by a professor in the science department with no input from the English department at all. As a candidate for their only composition position, I asked what involvement I might have in the WAC program. I was told "none," because they didn't want the English department to mess up WAC.

Members of the writing program need to educate their peers about what it is that the writing program does, and, more importantly, *can do* for the university at large--in other words, to seek a sort of temporary, localized, or ad hoc disciplinary status without the disciplinary boundaries of the more traditional departments. Louise Smith writes that

> The sooner that we admit our expertise in the study of the construction and reception of texts...and our expertise in composition theory and pedagogy, the more eager our colleagues will be to converse with us, knowing we're equally interested in their expertise and that we cheerfully recognize some overlap between their [discipline] and ours. (391)

Communication between the disciplines, while seemingly obvious and simple, is, as anyone who has attempted any sort of cross curricular project can attest to, one of the more difficult political and interpersonal tasks a person can take on. This is why the English/cultural studies model can be so important. The trans-disciplinary emphasis of cultural studies makes it at the same time less threatening and more cooperative in any sort of multi-disciplinary project such as WAC.

When Lester Faigley writes that "Postmodern theory offers an ongoing critique of discourses that pretend to contain truth and serve to justify practices of domination" (20), he is getting right to the heart of the debate over a writing program's place in the university--the irony between calling for a program to make some moves towards the center of the intellectual life of the university while at the same time preaching (and teaching) a critical literacy which calls into question the domination of a centralized discourse (and indeed, Faigley himself may well not believe that there is a center to work

towards, but I am working under the assumption that the *university* that we all have to work in is still centralized and hierarchized).

There are other programs that could rightly claim centeredness, and in a postmodern model there could easily be more than one center (just as there are more than one airlines and more than one hub). A department of quantitative analysis would more than likely be an excellent hub, as would a department of cultural history. And the moves being made under the umbrella "the rhetoric of the sciences" seem to indicate that the pure science people are recognizing the important part language plays in their disciplines as well as the potentially trans-disciplinary nature of writing. But all of these other departments would be largely two dimensional without writing at their core. Whether the quantitative analysis is "pure" mathematics or a mixture of math, computer science and philosophy (much like the artificial intelligence department at Carnegie Mellon), the constructedness of the discipline is still based in language (usually written) and is still suspect until proven otherwise.

The overall goal of a writing program based on a cultural studies model is to push the students towards agency. I see a cultural studies/composition studies program engaging students in

> learning that all experience is situated within signifying practices, and that learning to understand personal and social experience involves acts of discourse production and interpretation, the two acting reciprocally in reading and writing codes, (Berlin "Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies" 31)

while keeping in mind that "interpretation involves production as well as reproduction" of texts (31).

Writing needs to be deeply embedded in the pedagogies of the courses offered in the university, both within the English department, and outside of it. Asking faculty to recognize this is difficult. David Russell writes that "Even faculty who recognize the importance of writing for improving learning may not have the time to restructure their courses and pedagogies to incorporate writing more effectively" (295). Russell writes that the centrality of writing to the university curriculum has historically has some appealing administrative potential as well:

> In time, some administrators, as well as composition specialists, came to see [WAC programs] not only as ways of improving student writing but also as faculty development efforts, a means of initiating discussions of pedagogy among faculty and increasing contact between faculty and students. (290)

These initial discussions of pedagogy can quite easily lead to "interdisciplinary discussions of rhetoric, through workshops on discipline-specific uses of language and through cooperative research projects to describe and classify discipline-specific conventions of written discourse" (291-2), to which I would add critique. Which, it would seem to me, should lead to the breaking down of at least some of the traditional disciplinary boundaries that are still in existence, showing the traditional disciplines not only how they are indebted to each other (is there not a history of science or a rhetoric of mathematics?) but how the university is generally one big discipline, joined together by the construction of the disciplines by language.

If the mission of a writing program is to, as Berlin advocates,

> provide methods for revealing the semiotic codes enacted in the production and interpretation of texts, codes that cut across the aesthetic, the economic and political, and the philosophical and

> scientific, enabling students to engage critically in the variety of reading and writing practices required of them. (Berlin "Rhetoric, Poetic and Culture" 36)

then the only way we can hope to fulfill the promise of democratic citizenship is to make the writing program, with its knowledge of textual analysis, critical thinking, ethnography, and transdisciplinary focus, one of the hearts of the curriculum.

Roger Birnbaum's idea that "Administration is frustrating. Closure is elusive, systems come undone, solutions create new problems, no group is ever satisfied without another being dissatisfied, and criticisms about process can overwhelm substance" (176), has never been more true than now: with the endless debates over political correctness, back to basics, curricular reform, power, new-traditionalism, and even cultural studies, the real "substance" of the debate over education gets conveniently lost every time--students are central to the university's mission and the need to help them become the best citizens they can be in order that they be able to negotiate the twenty-first century is all that ultimately matters. The university needs to strengthen its mission of making students better, more well educated people than they were when they entered, and resist the increasing calls for mere vocational and technical education. But this needs to be done on the students' terms. Birnbaum ends his chapter on the Cybernetic Institution by writing that "if administration does not work, then perhaps we should alter our perceptions about what administrators are supposed to do and be more modest in our expectations about what they can accomplish" (176). The grand mission of creating democratic citizens should be underwritten by a mission that the university must give the students the tools which will enable them to negotiate the postmodern condition. The ability to read cultural signs, the

knowledge that ideologies are constructed, often through language, and that language itself is suspect are what universities should be imparting upon its students.

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